The English Manner

The Customs and Etiquette of Christmas

BACKGROUND NOTES

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The origins of Christmas

Christmas evokes so many memories and seems so familiar that we all feel we know what a ‘traditional Christmas’ looks like. Yet begin to delve into its history and nothing is quite as it seems.

It ought to be simple. Christmas - the ‘Christ Mass’ is a Christian feast day to celebrate the birth of Christ and yet it’s much more complicated. Let’s begin with the facts. We all know Christmas is the 25th December, but this wasn’t always the case.

Then what about the Bible? Again, it’s not so simple. Christmas isn’t mentioned in the Bible. The birth of Christ is only mentioned in two of the Gospels and even then, with scant details. So how did it come to pass that we celebrate the Christ Mass on the 25th December?

The truth is no one knows for certain, so let’s rule out the popular misconceptions first. It’s often said that the reason we celebrate Christmas on 25th December is because of the Roman festivals of Saturnalia and Sol Invictus. This link was only made in the 12th century, making it unlikely.

The more likely reason is the Christian belief that prophets were conceived and died on the same day. Using the evidence of the death of Jesus in the Bible, scholars worked out that he was conceived on 25th March, making 25th December his birthday. Other scholars argued it was 6th April, which is why the early eastern church kept 6th January as Christmas, and the Armenian church still does.

One of the most traditional decorations is greenery. Known by the old fashioned name of ‘Christmasing,’ evergreen foliage suggested the hope of a coming spring and had been used for midwinter festivals since ancient times. Boughs of pine, holly and mistletoe along with ivy were made into ‘kissing boughs’ from Tudor times onward.

This type of decoration would have seemed familiar in Roman times as similar evergreens were used for the midwinter festivals of Saturnalia and Sol Invictus. In Christian times the evergreens suggested eternal life. Holly evokes the Crown of Thorns and Christ’s blood.

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The yule log

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Christmas cards

This is something that the Victorians did invent in as much as a commercial card. Writing letters to one another at Christmas pre-dates commercial cards.

The first commercial Christmas card was introduced in 1843, one year after the Penny Post. It was commissioned by Sir Henry Cole and drawn by John Callcott Horsely. Two batches of 2,050 were printed and sold for one shilling each. This first card typically showed a family drinking and most early cards had humorous or family focussed themes. Religious and winter imagery came in later.

American printer Louis Prang introduced cards to America in 1874 after successfully launching them in Britain the previous year. Prang's success and huge operation (more than five million cards per year) began the blurring of British and American traditions.

The British Royal family, like many, saw Christmas as a time to send letters of good wishes to family and friends. In fact, what is sometimes described as the 'first' Christmas card (in fact, a letter) was sent to James I in 1611. The modern tradition of sending photographic cards wa

begun in 1914 by George V and Queen Mary and has been continued to this day. Today, Her Majesty The Queen sends around 700,000 cards a year.

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Christmas crackers

Christmas crackers were introduced in Britain in the 1840s by Tom Smith. They were inspired by sugar almonds wrapped in paper that he'd seen in Paris.

The earliest ones were wrapped sweets. Crackers gradually evolved adding the motto, the 'snap' finally emerging into the cracker we know, containing a toy and a paper hat towards the late 19th Century. The 'snap' was invented by Tom Smith's son and was inspired by the crackling of logs.

When first sold, crackers were known as 'cosaques' after the habit of Russian Cossack soldiers firing guns in the air.

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Wassailing

This is an ancient tradition that takes two main forms: house visiting and orchard visiting. Both involve singing and drinking from a wassail bowl or cup containing what we would call mulled wine.

The home visiting tradition fits into a number of connected traditions whereby normal social boundaries were relaxed, or upturned, during the Christmas period. In this tradition, peasants or tenants of farms or landed estates would arrive at the landlord's house, singing and offering 'wassail' or good cheer. They would be rewarded with a drink from the wassail bowl or cup and a small gift such as a cake or biscuit. Whilst this tradition has mostly died out, it's the origin of door-to-door carol singing.

In parts of Britain with a tradition of commercial orchards (mainly apple orchards in the west of England), wassailing took place in orchards and was more about giving blessings to the trees for a good harvest.

Wassail cups and bowls were usually made from Lignum Vitae, a dense wood of Caribbean origin which was imported to Europe from the early 16th century. These, often silver mounted, objects were only found in the grandest homes. More humble farms would simply use any bowl to hand.

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Christmas cakes, puddings and mince pies

In the days before refrigeration and worldwide logistics, preserving played a much more important role in cooking. Thus, wintertime stables often included dried fruits, such as apples and plums, later joined by raisins and sultanas.

Our modern rich fruit cake, wrapped in marzipan and covered in royal icing dates to the 19th century, but its earlier incarnation was the 'twelfth cake,' which is served at Epiphany (or Twelfth Night) like the French 'Galette du Roi' or the American 'King Cake' (which in New Orleans is served at Mardi Gras.)

The twelfth cake was a lighter fruit cake that contained a dried pea and a bean. It would be served to the entire household at Epiphany; the recipient of the pea would be 'crowned' Queen for the day and the bean 'King' of the day. This was a symbolic crowing and usually meant no work if you were a servant.

The drunkenness associated with this role reversal saw the cake wane in popularity, being replaced by the richer fruit and brandy-soaked Christmas cake in the 19th Century. The tradition of the pea and the bean became the shilling in the Christmas pudding.

'Frumenty' was an early incarnation of our later Christmas puddings. At its most basic, frumenty was a wheat or barley-based porridge eaten by peasants, but at Christmas time a sweet version was made with dried apples, plums and spices. During the Tudor period, the dish was often thickened with bread and eggs and flavoured with beer or spirits. This evolved into our traditional Christmas pudding, often known by the earlier name of 'Plum pudding.'

The earliest puddings were steamed in elaborate copper moulds seen in the grandest homes and used for jellies, whereas further down the social scale round puddings were boiled in what was known as a 'copper' which was a heated clothes boiler.

'Did mince pies once contain meat?' Well, yes and no. Some did, some didn't, it all depended on the recipe. The confusion comes from the name and its old meaning. Historically, 'mince' or properly 'minced' meant small, thus a 'mince' pie would be made from chopped ingredients.

Recipes for mince pies date back to the Tudor period when they were oblong in form, often with an image of the Christ child.

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Father Christmas or Santa Claus?

Today they are considered the same, but originally Father Christmas and Santa Claus were distinct figures.

This is the older, European version and essentially a personification of Christmas with mentions in England from the 15th century. Sometimes referred to as 'Captain Christmas' or 'Sir Christmas', by the 17th century he was widely known as 'Father Christmas.' Essentially a figure of folklore, in Britain during the Commonwealth his popularity grew as he became a figurehead against the banning of Christmas by Oliver Cromwell's Puritans. Prior to the Victorian era, Father Christmas was essentially a figure connected to good cheer and drinking.

Santa Claus derives from the tradition of St Nicholas or Sinterklaas in Dutch which in America became 'Sante Claus' or 'Santa Claus.' His name is seen in the Americanised version as early as 1773 but became much more popular in the 19th century.

'Santa Claus' first appears in an anonymous poem published in 1821, in a book called 'A Child's delight.' This shows the fully formed Santa on his sleigh with a reindeer. This Santa rewards good children with books or dolls in their stockings but leaves behind birch twigs for bad children to be scolded.

By the middle of the 19th century, the figures of Father Christmas and Santa Claus had become almost indistinguishable, largely due to the prominence of cheap American lithograph printed Christmas cards. Thomas Nast's depictions of a jolly rotund figure for Harper's Magazine from 1862 onwards solidified the modern idea of how Santa looked.

It's a pub quiz favourite to answer that Coca-Cola created the red and white Santa Claus, but it's wrong. Historically, both Santa and Father Christmas were depicted in various colours such as green, brown, blue as well as red. From 1931 onwards Coca-Cola employed artist Haddon Sundblom to illustrate a jolly figure of Santa drinking Coke. Naturally he was shown in the red and white corporate colours.

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Christmas trees and decorations

No, Prince Albert didn't invent it, but its thanks to an 1848 illustration of the Royal Family around a tree that gave rise to this theory. Christmas trees are a northern European tradition, which has now gone worldwide. Introduced by Queen Charlotte, the German wife of George III in 1800.

At a party held at Queens Lodge in Kensington Palace Gardens, a yew tree from the park was dug up and displayed on a table. Hung with treats for the guests which comprised children from poor families and 60 from noble families.

The earlier tradition in Germany was Christmas bough; a large branch erected on Christmas Eve to act as a focus of gift giving. In Germany, Christmas trees existed, but these were generally publicly elected trees.

Commercially grown Norwegian Spruce became more popular in the late 19th Century and this gave rise to more trees in homes.

The traditional blown glass ornaments originated in Lauscha in eastern Germany and, whilst they produced strings of glass baubles from the 17th century onwards, the industry only took off in the mid-19th century with the rise in the popularity of Christmas trees. The hand decoration of these baubles was valuable at home work for the local foresters and their wives during the quieter part of the season. Whilst most baubles are made in China today, those from Lauscha are still considered the best.

Whilst electric Christmas lights didn't really take off until the 20th century (and mostly in the 1950s onwards) they actually date as far back as 1882.

Edward H Johnson decorated his tree with walnut sized red, white and blue lights which were prominently displayed in the window of his 5th Avenue New York home. The fact he was in business with Thomas Edison (the co-inventor of electric lighting) was seen by many to suggest that this was a publicity stunt, which it was, but it nonetheless caused a sensation.

Despite this early display, electric lights didn't take off quickly as they were expensive and cumbersome and not widely available. Following the use of electric lights on the White House tree in 1895 the popularity grew and by 1900 commercial sets were available to buy or rent. Until these electric lights were mass produced in the late 1930s and especially in the post war period, the expense of electric tree lights made them out of the reach of most.

One of the reasons electric lights didn't take off was that cheaper alternatives were available. Small candles have been used as long as we've had Christmas trees, but they were short lasting and potentially dangerous. Glass night lights, a moulded glass lamp about the size of a jam jar, were a cheaper alternative. These coloured lamps that could be hung in trees or strung up for parties, remained a popular, and much cheaper, alternative.

In Britain, Christmas lights are often known as 'fairy lights'. This is from the premiere of the Gilbert and Sullivan operetta 'Iolanthe' where a number of the fairies had electric star crowns. It caused a sensation and the term 'fairy lights' was subsequently applied to any decorative electric light.

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Turkey or goose?

It has been said that some who choose goose as the Christmas bird sneer at those who serve turkey, citing its modernity, but they are wrong.

Turkey first came to the UK in the early 16th century, probably in 1526 after Sir Thomas Strickland brought six birds back from America. Whilst we don't know the exact date of the first birds, we do know that the Strickland family were so associated with Turkeys that in 1550 they were granted arms which included a 'Turkey cock in his pride proper.' Henry VIII was said to have enjoyed Turkey and likened it to Peacock, but less stringy.

The reason turkey did not take off was its initial rarity and it's more delicate feet. Unlike the goose, which could be easily walked to market, turkeys have more delicate feet which need protection on the walk to market. They also needed to be fattened up before and after market, making them much more expensive. It's this reason why Charles Dickens chooses a turkey as the bird in 'A Christmas Carol'. Readers at the time of the book's publication would realise that the turkey would be very expensive and therefore symbolic of how Scrooge had changed.

Turkey became much more popular with the rise of the railways in Britain, making it cheaper, but really took off in the second half of the 20th century.

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Mince pies

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Words: Steven Moore

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